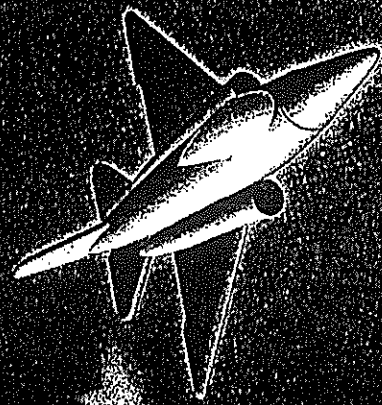


What is a short story?



What is a short story?

The universe is made up of stories, not of atoms.

Muriel Rukeyser

THE MEASURE OF OUR LIVES

Our lives are made up of stories. We tell stories about each other, about things that happen to us, about things we would like to happen, people we have seen, places we have been ... stories about anything, anyone, anywhere, any time. We tell stories, write them down, draw them, turn them into cartoons, films and songs, read them, listen to them, feel them and discover them. We are surrounded by the glitter and sparkle of a million stories. One of our fundamental experiences as people is to imagine a story, to create it in the fashion that it deserves, to share it with others and to enrich their lives. This is the wonder of storytelling: to imagine, create, share and enrich. This is why stories are essential: to say who we are, who we have been, and who we want to be. Stories are the measure of our lives.

DEFINING THE SHORT STORY

Stories, or narratives, come in many forms: novels, anecdotes, films, poems, television shows — even jokes. This book focuses on the short story in print form.

Most short stories have a particular structure and some defining characteristics, as well as the traditional elements of narrative fiction.

The story wheel on the right outlines the structure, elements and characteristics of the short story in more detail.

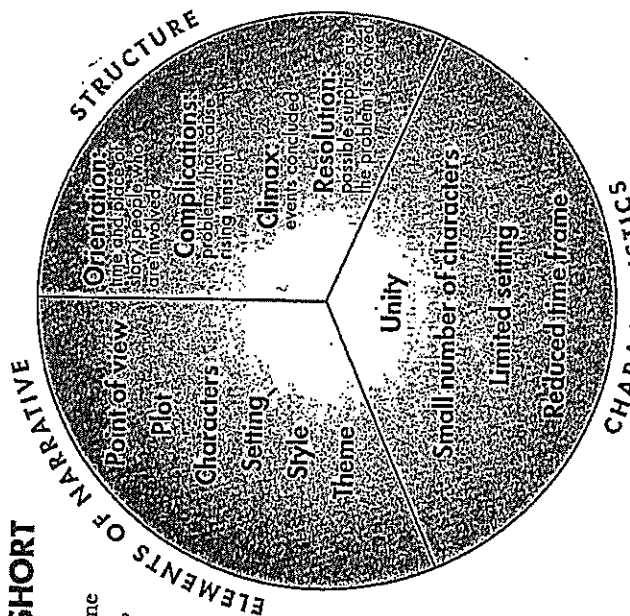


FIGURE 1.1 Story wheel

In this introduction, we will examine the structure, characteristics and elements of narrative that are present in short stories by focusing on Melanie Kirkwood's story *The Spillway*.

The Spillway

by Melanie Kirkwood

The party throbbed on, like a living thing with an existence and momentum all its own. Groups of kids stood in clusters around the room, squealing and laughing. I hesitantly approached the group nearest the doorway to the bathroom. I knew three of them from school: Marco, Penny and Grant. Marco and Grant had been in the basketball team I'd played in, although I'd never got to know them very well. I'd had more to do with Paul and Seb, who were the best shooters on the team. I was a shooter, too, and we used to practise together sometimes. I couldn't see either of them at the party, although I had seen them both that afternoon, right up near the dam. I hadn't bothered to go up and join them as I had to do some stuff for my Dad.

Nervously, I cleared my throat and managed to squeak, 'Hi, what's going down?'

Penny looked oddly at me and snorted, 'Oh God, Spencer, always trying to be so cool, aren't you?' — *Outcast - coming to a party*
I flinched as if she'd hit me and swore silently to myself. Why couldn't I ever get it right? Why was I always the jerk? Just when I'd think I had it, they went and changed all the rules. And I'd be on the edge again. I wondered why I'd even bothered to come to Dana's party. Just putting myself up to be cut down — that's me. Stupid!

They all laughed at Penny's retort and sniggered at me before going back to their exclusive conversation. It was as if I didn't exist. I mooched over to the table, grabbing a mouthful of cheesy things and a Coke, and looked for a corner to hide in. My head was seething with resentment and anger I could barely control. What did I have to do?

Then I saw Paul. He must have just come in, as I swear he wasn't there before. He was slouched in a corner near the couch, with a baseball cap half-obscuring his face. He looked like he was 'out of it'. I crouched down beside him and started to speak to him. He just pulled his hat down further and twirled his signet ring.

'Alright then, you ignore me too. You're just like the rest of this lot — a bunch of losers!'

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I stood up and yelled out again, 'LOSERS!!' pushing the chair over in front of me. Immediately, the noise stopped. For once, I was the centre of attention. Everyone in the room was looking at me. Someone turned down the music. Fifteen years of trying to belong, trying to fit in, loomed before me and exploded in a flash as I faced them all angrily.

'Yeah, losers! You think you're all so cool. But none of you know what living is. You think it's walking the edge to give a teacher a hard time. You'd all be sick and running home to Mummy if you'd done what I did today.' I had their undivided interest. I waited a few seconds before announcing, 'I walked-the spillway.'

I heard a few people gasp. There had been an open dare to walk across the dam's spillway for as long as I could remember. No-one had ever done it, of course. Not surprisingly, as it was not only forbidden by law, but highly dangerous. Of course, I hadn't really walked across the spillway — I'm not that stupid! — but they weren't to know that. Marco, Penny and Grant were looking at me. I knew they didn't know whether to believe me or not.

'Yep!' I said to myself under my breath. At last they are taking notice. I glanced round the room. My eyes stopped on Paul who was staring at me in a most peculiar manner. His face looked as white as a sheet and his mouth was hanging open.

Slowly, the party began to resume its noise and throb. It was different though; I was part of it now as I chatted to a small group who gathered around me to hear more about my 'exploit.' At that moment, almost as if on cue, two police officers appeared at the open front door. At first they weren't noticed above the clamour and the push of moving bodies, but they gradually made their presence felt. The burble decreased to a hushed whisper.

The senior sergeant cleared his throat. 'Did any of you kids see Seb Robertson today?'

The question was met with silence. Then Julie spoke up: 'He said he was coming tonight when I saw him at the newsagent. But he hasn't turned up yet. Why do you ask?'

'I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but late this afternoon we identified a body found in Mallaga Creek as that of Seb Robertson. As you can appreciate, his family are devastated. It looks as if the young lad might have been walking across the spillway when he fell. His parents knew this party was on tonight as Seb had told them he was coming. We thought some of you might possibly be able to help us get to the bottom of this.'

For the second time that evening, all eyes were suddenly focused on me. I felt a rising wave of nausea. The senior sergeant looked at me fixedly.

'Have you got anything to say, son?' he demanded, almost roughly.

Through my foggy panic, I was suddenly aware that Paul had jumped to his feet and was jostling people. We all swivelled as one to look at him as he began to speak, jerkily, and with tears coursing down his cheeks. 'Yeah, I know

about it. It was all my ... my fault. We were up there fishing, and I dared him to walk the wall. It's an old dare that's been around the school for years. Believe me, I didn't want him to do it. I didn't think for a moment he'd think I ... I was serious. He just laughed and told me someone had to have the guts to do it one day.'

There was a stricken silence. Paul continued in a small, choked voice: 'He ... he ... fell, and God help me, I didn't know what to do. What could I do? I ran away. I have been trying all night ... all bloody night ... to pretend it didn't happen.'

His body was racked with sobs as the constable walked over to him. The eyes of everyone in the room were fixed on Paul.

Gulping, I wiped my perspiring brow. As the relief swept over me, the irony of the situation hit me with a jolt. I was undone again. Like always, I was one step behind the action.

Resolution

Structure

Short stories tend to follow a simple structure.

- The orientation introduces us to the time and place of the setting, the main characters, and the main idea of the story.
- Complications or events that occur in the story move the plot towards the ending, creating tension or interest as they do so.
- The climax of the story is where the main action is concluded.
- The resolution consists of the events after the climax, which may include a surprise or twist.

This structure can be seen in *The Spillway*.

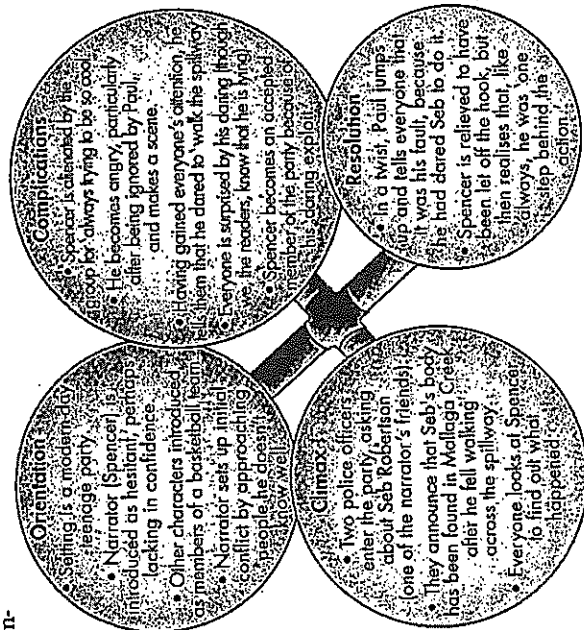
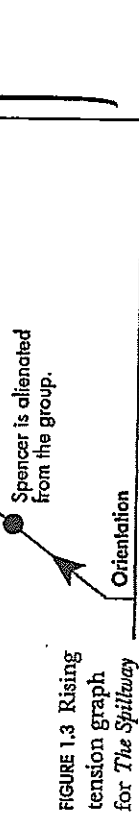


FIGURE 1.2 The structure of *The Spillway*

Rising tension

Short stories often rely upon rising tension to maintain reader interest. This means that the dramatic action of the plot should create more and more tension as we are led towards the story's ending. For example, Spencer lies in order to make himself the centre of attention, but then his lie is undone by the entrance of the police. The tension rises as the story progresses, a writing technique that can be represented as a graph:



Characteristics

The short story is one of many ways of writing a narrative, but it does have its own set of characteristics that makes it different from novels, films, cartoons and other forms of narrative.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SHORT STORY

1. UNITY

Because they are longer forms, novels and films include plenty of detail — detail which might not be vital to the telling of the story, but which is included to set the scene, establish a mood or develop our understanding of a character. In contrast, short stories are reduced, concentrated forms of writing, meaning that every detail must contribute to the unity of the story. As with most forms of poetry, there is no room in a short story for unnecessary detail; every word, every sentence, every paragraph should help to create the overall unity of the story.

2. SMALL NUMBER OF CHARACTERS

There is little point in introducing a large number of characters in a short story, because there is not enough time to deal with them all. *The Spillway*, for example, has two main characters, Spencer and Paul. Other minor characters, such as Penny and the police, contribute to the action of the plot, but Spencer is particular drives the story. The short stories in this collection all use a small number of characters.

[continued]



3. LIMITED SETTING

Whereas novels may jump from place to place and from country to country, most short stories use a single setting. This allows the writer to focus on the development of the plot, without having to continually describe new settings. This is not to say that other places are ignored. The *Spillway* is set at a party in Dana's house, but the spillway itself — a dangerously narrow path across a waterway — is a vital part of the story's development.



4. REDUCED TIME FRAME

Short stories are too concentrated to allow large shifts in the time frame of the action. The events of the story are compressed into a short period to allow the narrative to develop quickly and easily. The action of *The Spillway* probably takes less than an hour; other short stories may depict longer periods, but rarely vast lengths of time. The events described in Ambrose Bierce's famous short story *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* happen in a few seconds.

Elements of narrative

All narrative writing contains six main elements, as shown in the figure below:

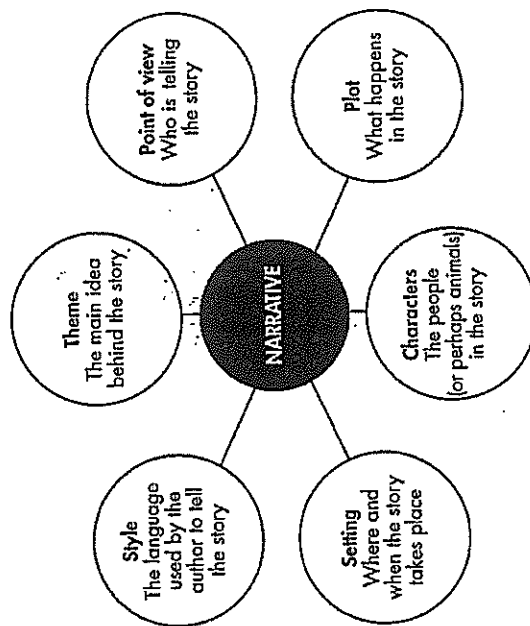


FIGURE 1.5 The elements of narrative

Point of view

Authors have several choices about who the narrator of the story will be. The following table summarises these.

	FIRST PERSON	SECOND PERSON	THIRD PERSON
The narrator is:	A major character or A minor character	An observer or A participant	Omniscient — that is, someone who sees everything
Who uses pronouns like:	I, me, my, we, our	you, your	he, she, they, his, her, their
The advantage of this point of view is:	The narrator is an eyewitness to events. This makes readers feel as if they are there.	It is an unusual form of storytelling. The reader becomes a character in the story.	It helps the reader understand all aspects of the characters and the world of the story.
A disadvantage of this point of view might be:	The narrator cannot know everything about the other characters and can really only know his or her own mind.	It is very difficult to keep writing in this way throughout an entire story, and the reader may not accept being a character in a story.	The narrator may sound too detached, or too objective, so the reader may be less likely to become involved in the story.

The Spillway is an example of a story narrated in the first person by a major character. The narrator is part of the action, and tells the reader what he sees — although he may not necessarily provide every detail. He is unable to see into the minds of other characters, but is able to describe them and guess what they are thinking. Other first person narratives may use a minor character who is more of an observer than someone directly involved in the action of the story.

Second person narration is rarely used. It is a difficult form of writing to sustain, and requires the reader to believe that he or she is actually in the story. This can feel quite unnatural, and the reader may not want to make the effort it requires to get involved in this sort of narrative.

Stories told from the point of view of the third person often use an omniscient narrator. This means that they can see into the minds of every character, and describe all their feelings, desires and motivations. Sometimes, however, the third person narrator may describe events without knowing everything. It is as if they are an invisible eyewitness to what is happening. This sort of narrator does not describe what cannot be seen.

Get students to find an example of 1st + 3rd from short stories. What is a short story? 9

Plot and character

The plot, or action, of a story invariably occurs because of the characters, and who they are. A plot develops because of conflict or struggle between opposing forces, represented by the characters. For example, in *The Spillway* the action is initiated by a conflict between the desire for peer-group acceptance (Spencer) and the desire not to accept someone who tries too hard (Penny and the others). Here are some other examples of plot development from this collection:

- In *Alexander the Great*, the plot develops because of conflict between someone who likes telling exaggerated stories (Alexander) and people who don't believe him (the narrator, Pop-Eye McKay and Bunny Roberts).
- In *Leaving Mother*, the plot develops because of conflict between a society which tries to control all aspects of life (represented by Mother) and two people who want to be free to love each other (Vell and Jordi).
- In *Xena-phobia*, the plot develops because of conflict between people who like to control others through abuse (Madeleine and The Gang of Four) and someone who wants to correct that situation (Skye).

Setting

The setting is the time and place of the story. Sometimes the setting is simply a backdrop for what happens in the story; whereas at other times it is a crucial part of the story. In *The Spillway*, the setting is quickly sketched in, allowing the action of the story to commence:

The party throbbed on, like a living thing with an existence and momentum all its own.

There are further clues throughout the story about the other setting — the very important spillway:

There had been an open dare to walk across the dam's spillway for as long as I could remember. No-one had ever done it, of course. Not surprisingly, as it was not only forbidden by law, but highly dangerous.

... late this afternoon we identified a body found in Mallaga Creek ...

We were up there fishing, and I dared him to walk the wall.

Time and place are important in this story and are regularly referred to. This applies to other stories in this collection, too. For example, in Maggie Saldais's *The River*, the movements of the river are echoed in the action of the story. In Carolin Window's *The Slaters* and Jane Greenwood's *Up At Quinn's*, the plot is clearly integrated with the particular world inhabited by the characters.

Style

Style means the language chosen by the author to tell the story. It is what makes a piece of writing distinctive. The style of some well-known writers is so distinctive we can identify who wrote a particular piece even if we have never read it before. For example, the American writer Ernest Hemingway had a unique style that used lots of short sentences and uncluttered, journalistic language.

Style can include elements such as those in the diagram on the right.

In *The Spillway*, the language is relaxed and modern, in keeping with the teenage characters. Words and phrases like *cool*, *goin' down*, *ferk* and *out of it* reflect the adolescence of the characters. The arrival of the policemen brings a more formal tone to the language:

It looks as if the young lad might have been walking across the spillway when he fell.

Sentence length is also an important aspect of style. Short sentences, joined by long pauses, can be used to create emotional tension:

He ... he ... fell, and God help me, I didn't know what to do. What could I do? I ran away. I have been trying all night ... all bloody night ... to pretend it didn't happen.

Similarly, using shortened paragraphs — particularly in sentences that contain dialogue — can make the action move quickly and decisively. In the following example, the organisation of the sentences into small paragraphs helps to set the pace and create tension.

The senior sergeant cleared his throat. 'Did any of you kids see Seb Robertson today?'

The question was met with silence. Then Dana spoke up: 'He said he was coming tonight when I saw him at the newsagent. But he hasn't turned up yet. Why do you ask?'

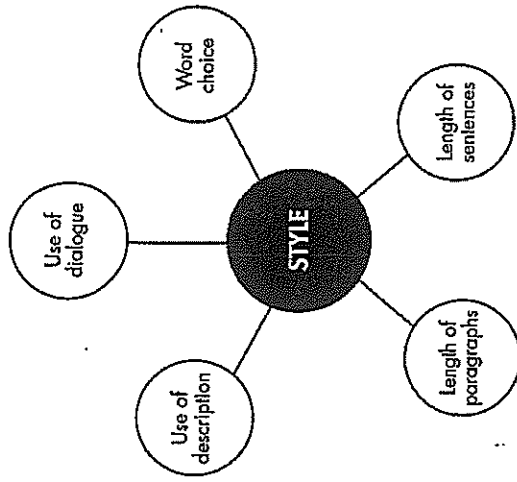


FIGURE 1.6 The elements of style

Dialogue is also a vital ingredient in short-story writing. Using dialogue enables the author to show what a character is like by sharing his or her speech and tone with the reader. It breaks up the structure of the story and adds interest.

Theme

Theme is a term that generally refers to the main idea or ideas behind the story. For example, the plot of *The Spillway* concerns a teenager who tries to win social acceptance by inventing a lie, then discovers that his friend has died in similar circumstances to those in the lie. The themes, however, could be seen as peer-group pressure, or the consequences of lying, or death.

Theme is not always easy to work out. For one thing, most stories usually mean different things to different people. Theme is not necessarily obvious, nor is it easily explained. The great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy once said about theme:

The most important thing in a work of art is that it should have a kind of focus — there should be some place where all the rays meet or from which they issue. And this focus *must not* be able to be completely explained in words.

Writers rarely write stories because they want to make a grand statement about a theme. They write because they want to enjoy the process of creation, or because they cannot get a situation off their minds.

VARYING THE FORM

Although many short stories follow the formula that we have already described, many others do not. This is one of the most exciting things about the short story; it is a creative work of art and therefore its form can be infinitely varied. In this collection, you will have the opportunity to read short stories that have a traditional form, as well as:

- a story that offers you the chance to choose your own ending
- a story written as a series of e-mails
- a story that is a student's personal essay to his teacher
- a story that includes an angel as a character.

Short stories don't always follow the rules. A story might consist of an exchange of letters or a telephone conversation. It may be written from the point of view of a small child or an animal, or include pictures or diagrams. It may have an exact number of words (such as a mini-saga, which must include a beginning, middle and end, and be 50 words in length). It may be written in different shapes, be all dialogue or have no dialogue — there are endless possibilities. As with all creative arts, the rules of writing short stories are useful, but they are not unbreakable.

SO WHY DO I HAVE TO READ THIS, SIR/MISS?

- Because it could be fun.
- Because it might entertain you ... maybe even as much as television or that latest CD.
- Because a character, or place, or word or moment might touch a chord in your heart, even if you didn't know it was there.
- Because you might recognise a part of yourself.
- Because it will be enriching and enjoyable.
- Because reading and writing and language are the foundation of human culture, and you owe it to yourself to experience as much of that foundation as you possibly can.

Activities

Once you have read some of the stories in this collection, complete these general activities in your notebook for a particular story (or a number of stories) as directed by your teacher:

1. In the orientation of the story:
 - (a) how was the setting established?
 - (b) who were the main characters?
2. Construct a graph to show the rising tension in the story.
3. What was the climax of the story?
4. Were there any clues in the story that led you towards the climax? What were they?
5. Did the resolution contain a surprise or twist? If so, what was it?
6. What was the time frame of the story?
7. (a) From whose point of view was the story told?
(b) Would the story have been more effective told from a different point of view? Explain your answer fully.
8. Write a sentence that summarises each of the main characters: their appearance, personality and motivation.
9. Write a short paragraph that discusses the style the writer has used in the story.
10. Did the story have a theme?
 - (a) If so, what was it?
 - (b) How did you know?